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The Mask of Masculinity

Leonardo DiCaprio's stellar performance of Jack Dawson in *The Titanic* stole the hearts of women all around the world. Maybe it was his long blonde hair and dreamy blue eyes, or maybe it was his selflessness and sensitivity. In Susan Seidelman's film, *Desperately Seeking Susan*, Dez's character has a similar impact. He defies the classic gender norms of society's ideal man, lacking class and masculinity; however, Roberta still winds up leaving her idealistic husband for him. Dez proves that even though society glorifies the stereotyped fearless, detached, wealthy masculine role, women love someone who is empathetic and genuine.

A man's status makes up much of his identity. One aspect of being viewed as a real man in society is to provide; therefore, people applaud wealth and class, especially in men. Both genders respect and reinforce this stereotype. When Dez brings Susan back to his apartment for the first time, they find his ex-girlfriend, Victoria, taking out all of the furniture. Victoria defends her actions saying, "It's my stuff, Dez," to which he replies, "So you just come and take it. No phone call, no discussion, no nothing" (Seidelman). Dez does not care about the stuff or the money; he cares about their relationship. In addition, unlike the expected dismissive, masculine behavior, Dez's posture is forward and open as he greets Victoria's boyfriend under the awkward circumstances. Right before Victoria leaves, she studies Susan and says to her, "He's really a nice guy, you'll be happy together" (Seidelman). What could be seen as such an innocent and even kind remark is actually quite cutting when examined. Victoria moved up and on in social rank with her new boyfriend who, judging from his blazer, dress pants, leather loafers, and Porsche, is fairly wealthy. She looks at Roberta and sees a trashy low-class woman wandering the streets with her wild hair and mismatched, colorful attire. Therefore, Victoria implies that someone of Roberta's inferior status and importance will be content with the life Dez provides,

one that could never satisfy a high-class woman like herself. Victoria does not value Dez's upstanding characteristics and sees him as less of a man because of his lack of wealth. As Victoria illustrates society's appreciation of status and masculinity and how the two go together to depict the ideal man, Dez defies these expectations.

Hurt, confused, and distressed are all adjectives most commonly used to describe a woman's experience in a relationship. However, Dez struggles with these so-called feminine feelings and his sensitive side after Susan flees his apartment. A few minutes before she escaped, Dez had been talking to Jim about his relationship with her. When Jim warns Dez about how "Susan" "plays with people," Dez is quick to defend their relationship, insisting, "I don't think she's playing with me" (Seidelman). His response mirrors the stereotypical reaction of a girl in denial. In most films with a female lead, the woman experiences a climactic moment of distress that usually has to do with the man she is involved with. And most films illustrate women aiding leading-male characters on their journey of self-discovery. However, the opposite takes place here. Roberta has run away again and Dez, is left completely stumped by her actions. Stagnantly laying in his hammock stroking his cat, pondering everything in his life, Dez exposes his sensitive side. He experiences the traditionally female climactic crisis as he is unsure of how to move forward without Roberta. Dez's actions contradict the classic American saying "the man of the house," which implies the man deals with the world while the woman stays home. Instead, Dez sits at home and embodies the typical female stereotype. Overcome by his feelings for Roberta, he becomes unable to function due to the uncertainty of their relationship.

Through society's eyes, a man's worth lies in his masculinity, which is made up of his status, bravery, and indifference toward relationships. Even though Dez is a middle-class man who exhibits qualities of sensitivity and contrasts with the world's ideal male gender norms,

Roberta ultimately leaves her perfect husband for him. She loves his compassion for people. That is exactly what Roberta was so “desperately seeking.” authenticity. Dez’s relationship with Roberta proves that people crave genuine connections with one another. However, not all aspects of masculinity are bad; one of these is courage. By that standard, Dez presents the actual embodiment of what masculinity should be as he is brave enough to defy society’s harsh standards, solely by being his sensitive self.

Works Cited

Seidelman, Susan, director. *Desperately Seeking Susan*. Orion Pictures, 1985.